

Advent People Rejoice
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
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The Rev. Dr. Nina R. Pooley

This third Sunday in Advent, we shift a little. We mark that shift by the rose-colored candle and vestments. It's rose Sunday, JOY Sunday (perhaps our music director Joy should be wearing Rose?!). It's Gaudete Sunday - when we rejoice. Even during the Middle Ages, when the Church's observance of Advent was similar to that of Lent, today things would lighten up. On this Sunday the introit to the mass would be: *Gaudéte in Dómino semper: íterum dico, gaudéte*. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice.

Rejoice in the Lord Always. Today we express our joy and gladness, as we look with expectation to all that God will do. We're in great company this morning - joined by Isaiah, Mary, and John. One of my favorite professors, Dr. Anatheia Portier-Young, translates the beginning lines of our passage from Isaiah in this way: "They will rejoice: wilderness and dry land themselves will rejoice. The desert will shout with joy and it will bloom like a crocus. It will **bloom**! And it will shout with joy – **joy** and joyous song."¹

Imagine it - Isaiah's wilderness sings! And not only will dry land turn to green growth, but weak and frightened bodies will gain courage and strength. To minds and hearts gripped by anxiety and despair, Isaiah says, "Be strong, do not fear." Because the source of strength and salvation is in your midst. God is right here. And God will come.

Dr. Portier-Young has more wisdom to share with us, as she writes:

God's arrival transforms every inability into ability
and every lack into miraculous abundance.
God's coming brings the capacity to see and hear
to those whose senses are starving for light and sound.
Nerves heal and grow and send and receive signals,
atrophied muscles grow strong and limber.
What are these capacities for? They are for celebration.
They are ... the gratuitous expression of joy
in what God can do and what God has done.
The man who could not walk will have strength in his legs to walk.
But he won't walk. He will jump.
He will leap and bound like a fool for God.
The man who couldn't or wouldn't speak will find himself able to talk.
But he won't talk. He will shout. He will sing.
He will praise God at the top of his lungs...

Dr. Portier-Young continues:

And there is one more miracle still: the road home.
There, in the place that once was wilderness,
once a place of wandering, will be a raised road.
There will be no more wandering and no more danger.
The people God has redeemed and ransomed will walk on it,
... and they will come home. As they walk homeward,
upon their head, like a canopy, a garland, or a crown,
will be a joy not bounded by time.
Rejoicing and gladness will meet them on the road.
Sorrow and sighing will flee.”²

Friends, **this** is the vision of God’s salvation that emboldens Mary’s song. Grounded in the promises of the prophets, Mary rejoices in what God is doing for God’s people. She trusts that God will change the world, and has already begun.

Isaiah's vision has John leaning forward in his jail cell, anticipating the return of his disciples with the answer to his question, "Are you the one?" And it's in this context of God's salvation that Jesus answers, 'Go and tell John what you see happening. Go and tell John about the rejoicing, the healing. All that Isaiah promised has begun in our midst.'

On Gaudete Sunday, let's take a break from the heavily marketed season around us. Take this moment to look up from our lists of all that has to be done. Set down the overwhelming expectations of the season and choose something *else*.

Choose instead to be Advent people - expectant of God’s work in our lives, and our world. Trusting that God will act according to God’s love, and trusting ourselves to God's safekeeping.

Advent people who wait expectantly and joyfully. People actively present to the moment. Looking for the joy in our midst - celebrating moments of joy, and creating those moments for others. Together, we might provide some joy for our parched and desperate world.

Which begs the question - where do **we** find joy (besides at the organ console)? Where do we find joy in our daily lives?

I believe it helps to be actively present to our lives. Joy can be found in a moment as profound as a family gathering, or as simple as walking the dog on a beautiful snowy afternoon.

Here at St. Stephen's, perhaps by joining the St. Stephen's Table team, or singing with the choir, praying with the compline prayer gathering, laughing with a friend in coffee hour, or caroling with the youth group.

We know that real joy is found in our relationships: with God, one another, and creation. Embracing joy is a radically transformative attitude toward life. In the face of our culture's consumerism, cynicism, polarizing politics, suffering and anxiety; as people of faith, we choose to live joyfully. **That's** as miraculous as the lame walking, and the blind seeing.

My friends, our homework this week is to notice moments of joy, perhaps note them in our advent journals. And share as much joy as we can. Because the world desperately needs Advent people - those who live joyfully, trusting in what has already begun. God is here, God is coming in Christ, and God's kingdom is drawing near.

Advent Ones, may we rejoice, leap, shout, and sing! Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice! Amen.

¹ Dr. Anatheia Portier-Young, *Commentary on Isaiah 35:1-10*, posted on December 10, 2010; workingpreacher.com

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